

Senate Families and Human Services Committee

Tuesday, February 3, 2009

Testimony of Gary Tester, Director of Advocacy, Holy Cross Children's
Services

Chairman Jansen, Senators Hardiman and Jacobs, and Guests – my name is Gary Tester and I am the Director of Advocacy for Holy Cross Children's Services. Thank you for providing this opportunity to comment on the challenges and opportunities facing Michigan's child welfare system. Your dedication to Michigan's children and families has never been more important than it is in 2009, as critical decisions must be made this year that will determine what this system will look like in the next three to five years.

Holy Cross Children's Services was founded as Boysville of Michigan in October, 1948 as a boarding school for 16 boys identified by the Catholic Bishops of Michigan. Boysville was supported by the Michigan Knights of Columbus and administered by the Brothers of Holy Cross, from South Bend, Indiana. The school was located on land provided to the Archdiocese of Detroit by Henry Ford. From that humble beginning 60 years ago, the agency has grown into one of Michigan's largest non-profit providers of children's services. Over 800 coworkers are employed at Holy Cross Children's Services and are supported by hundreds of foster parents and thousands of volunteers. Now serving over 2,500 boys, girls and families each year from nearly all of Michigan's 83 counties at 25 sites throughout the Lower Peninsula, the agency provides education, residential services, foster care, Supervised Independent Living and other community-based services to Michigan's most vulnerable children and families. For 60 years, Holy Cross Children's Services has been dedicated to "Bringing Hope to Families".

Holy Cross Children's Services is a proud member of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families and strives to be a productive participant in discussions at the local and state levels regarding how best to serve children and families. Through the Federation, agencies such as Holy Cross Children's Services strive to insure that the best possible services are provided in the most cost-efficient manner possible. Quality of care is essential, as the children and families referred for help have often been rejected somewhere else and are skeptical about whether help offered is real or simply 'window dressing'. The Michigan Federation for Children and Families takes seriously the role of helping to shape Michigan's child welfare system, especially at this critical point in the state's history.

I want to explain what my agency views as a few of the critical issues requiring thoughtful consideration and deliberation by our elected officials in the Michigan Senate.

- The federal class-action lawsuit settlement provides a tremendous opportunity for creative solutions to long-standing concerns and challenges within the child welfare system in general and within the foster care system specifically. As is often the case, tremendous opportunities are accompanied by difficult challenges. The state must take immediate action to begin to address staffing ratios and related changes as well as critical training issues that impact the skills and experiences of those who accept social work as their vocation, whether in the public or private sector. Our Department of Human Services, under the welcome direction of Director Ismael Ahmed, Chief Deputy Director Stanley Stewart and Deputy Director Kathryne O'Grady, is working tirelessly to implement positive changes. The legislature must act, through policy and finance, to continue supporting these efforts. First and foremost are the needed

increases to the rates for foster care and residential care in the private sector.

- While the lawsuit settlement pertains specifically to foster care, it is vitally important to remember that our entire child welfare system is in need of improvement. Michigan has critical federal audits forthcoming in the next six to eighteen months, including Title IV-E and the Child and Family Service Review. These audits demand close collaboration between the public and private partners who comprise Michigan's child welfare system. Findings in these audits can cost an already strapped system millions of dollars in critical federal aid. Members of the legislature must insure that the public and private sectors have the financial resources necessary to implement quality services and track them completely.
- We all recognize the incredible strain that today's economic climate is putting on families that faced difficult challenges prior to our financial crisis. At a time when resources to support services for children and families are more scarce, the need is greater than ever. The Michigan Department of Human Services has been working with its private partners to stretch every dollar as far as possible. Frankly, I believe the system can't stretch any further. Already, numerous private providers have made the painful decision to close their doors or to cease providing critical services. Others have now done all they can do to stay open and are on the brink of bankruptcy. Lines of credit have been exhausted. While many agencies employ professional development officers to assist in raising funds to support services, today's climate is simply not supportive of this technique as a sure-fire means of revenue enhancement. In fact, in 2008, Holy Cross Children's Services fell short of its unrestricted fundraising goal by over \$700,000. These funds are needed to cover the costs of

services that current state contracts don't fully fund, in spite of the fact that the state requires them.

It is only through the dedication of the current DHS administration and you, our concerned legislative champions, that light is still perceived at the end of the tunnel. It is critical that policy decisions of the legislature in 2009 and in the next three to five years support creative solutions to issues we face, including how best to leverage federal funds necessary to augment whatever our state's general fund will support, how to creatively blend state and federal funds across systems in order to provide quality mental health services and how to plan for increased financial resources needed to successfully implement improvements to the system, whether mandated by the settlement or simply identified as needed.

- Each of you on this committee is a dedicated champion of children and families. I know that each of you makes it a point to participate in public discussions and task forces addressing the needs of children and families. The Michigan Federation for Children and Families is committed to working with our partners at the Michigan Department of Human Services to promote ongoing opportunities for elected officials to be updated and educated about the challenges and opportunities our system faces. It is vitally important that you, our legislative champions, invite your colleagues in the Michigan Senate and House to be a part of these conversations. Truly, in this legislative session and in the years to come, every vote will count.
- Finally, we must confront the reality that our laws allow children who have been abused, neglected and left to fend for themselves to receive adult prison sentences for crimes they commit as they work to survive in an environment they perceive as threatening and hostile. How is our state served when adolescents often exposed to the very

worst society has to offer during their most important developmental years have their futures secured for them in an adult correctional facility? It is critical that our legislative members work with public and private partners to insure that a strong Bureau of Juvenile Justice is supported to provide treatment in a secure setting with the goal of assisting these youth in reversing the destructive paths they have been placed upon.

As I conclude my remarks, I recall many of my peers and mentors with decades of experience with Michigan's child welfare system stating that our state once had the best system of care in the country. Today, in spite of the obvious critical challenges we face, we have the opportunity to lay the policy and financial foundation to once again make Michigan's child welfare system the envy of all others. It will take our collective will and dedication to bring about the changes we collectively desire, but it is possible. I implore you to continue providing opportunities such as today's hearing to bring attention to this matter.

Again, thank you for providing me the opportunity to share my thoughts today. Please know that the Michigan Federation for Children and Families and Holy Cross Children's Services are dedicated to working with the Michigan Department of Human Services and the Michigan Legislature to make our system one that serves children and families with quality, dignity and respect.